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100 YEARS OF EROTICA

A PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTFOLIO OF MAINSTREAM AMERICAN SUBCULTURE FROM 1845-1945

BY PAUL ARATOW

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A·PHOTOGRAPHIC·PORTFOLIO·OF·MAINSTREAM·AMERICAN·SUBCULTURE·FROM·1845=1945

BY·PAUL·ARATOW

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France 1920

100 YEARS OF EROTICA

France 1900

INTRODUCTION

ute but eloquent testimony of America's cultural past, this collection of historic and artistic photographs indicates a continuity of creative imagination in graphic erotic art which has its roots in the cave paintings at the dawn of our civilization. Through ages of literature, painting and sculpture, the sexual experience has supplied a primary subject matter for artistic expression. Photography, now over one hundred years old, has likewise taken its place among these other art forms as an important medium for the expression of human sexuality.

The publication of these photographs enhances the already considerable body of literature and art now extant in museums and galleries, and in other books such as the Erotic Art of India, the Erotic Art of Greece and the recent Kronhausen collections of erotic art. All of this art—literature, sculpture, painting, photography—helps us toward the recognition and understanding of the composition of our complex sexual consciousness.

In addition to the artistic value of these photographs, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and other students of the human condition will find here a rich and extensive portrayal of certain historical aspects of the life experience; whilst poets and painters will witness a nostalgic pageant of bygone days, the creative fantasies of our ancestors, the totems of our erotic past.

A work of art is some artifact that has an intimate involvement with life processes. This is true of cave paintings as well as vinyl balloons. As our culture—and therefore our aesthetic perception—evolves, we use different but appropriate styles of art to interpret reality. And by understanding how a culture interpreted reality, we understand something more about that culture. By understanding how our own culture interprets reality, we gain a better knowledge of ourselves.

This book represents a genre of art that has circulated in the United States for over one hundred years. As with other genres it has drawn its models from all over the world. As our culture evolved from the complex strictures of the nineteenth century, through the neo-decadence of the twenties to the awkward adolescence of the early forties, the style and manner of its erotic art reflected those changes. The earliest photographs show a characteristic romantic preoccupation with costume and setting; the later examples from the twenties reflect the influence of the predominant neo-realistic currents in art and literature during that

France 1910

period, as well as a changing orientation toward sexual roles. Moreover, improved photographic materials and techniques enabled the photographer to get out of the studio and to explore more naturalistic forms of expression. Finally, the most recent photographs reflect the forties preoccupation with the automobile, the girl next door, new conventions of beauty and a necessarily cheerful optimism in the face of World War II.

In its entirety, this collection represents a broad spectrum of photographic erotic art in circulation throughout America. Consequently many different attitudes and interpretations from each historical period are necessarily included, from the classic portraiture of the pinup to explicit naturalistic interpretation of human sexual behavior.

Erotic photography is a conventional art. The subject matter was as formalized for these photographers as it was for the painters who produced countless sunsets and still-lifes. The topic was set; the interest lay in execution and variation within the theme.

Art of magic and incantation has this typically limited range of subject matter; for these pictures, like the animals in cave paintings or the engravings on magical rings, Goya's Horrors of War or the widely distributed photographs of alleged war atrocities in our generation, are not just meant to be abstract representations, but models, endowed with a direct relationship to the real thing. Possession of the mysterious characters implies a special power. Talismen of this type do not merely represent the power; they contain it.

This kind of art is not only decorative. It is produced for its existence, not just for the abstractions implied by a formalistic apprehension of the graphics. It is, in fact, representational. Because of this it might even be called "primitive." A more accurate appellation, however, is folk art.

Most folk art is produced by the general populace outside the pale of formal artistic circumstances. Furthermore, it is intended, in one way or another, for popular consumption. Frequently the producers, often anonymous, are not professional artists with extensive training or discipline. Thus, graffitists, street poets, basket weavers, cave painters and the great majority of potters and photographers participate in this ancient fraternity of folk artists. These artists have a particular relationship to their audience, and their sophistication is of a very special kind.

The demand for erotic photographs is a fact amply confirmed by the enormous body of material in circulation. Clearly these photographs were mass-produced for a mass market. Cuba, France, England, Japan and our own United States have a long documented history of their production. The remarkable popularity and continuing fascination of all levels of

Italy 1875

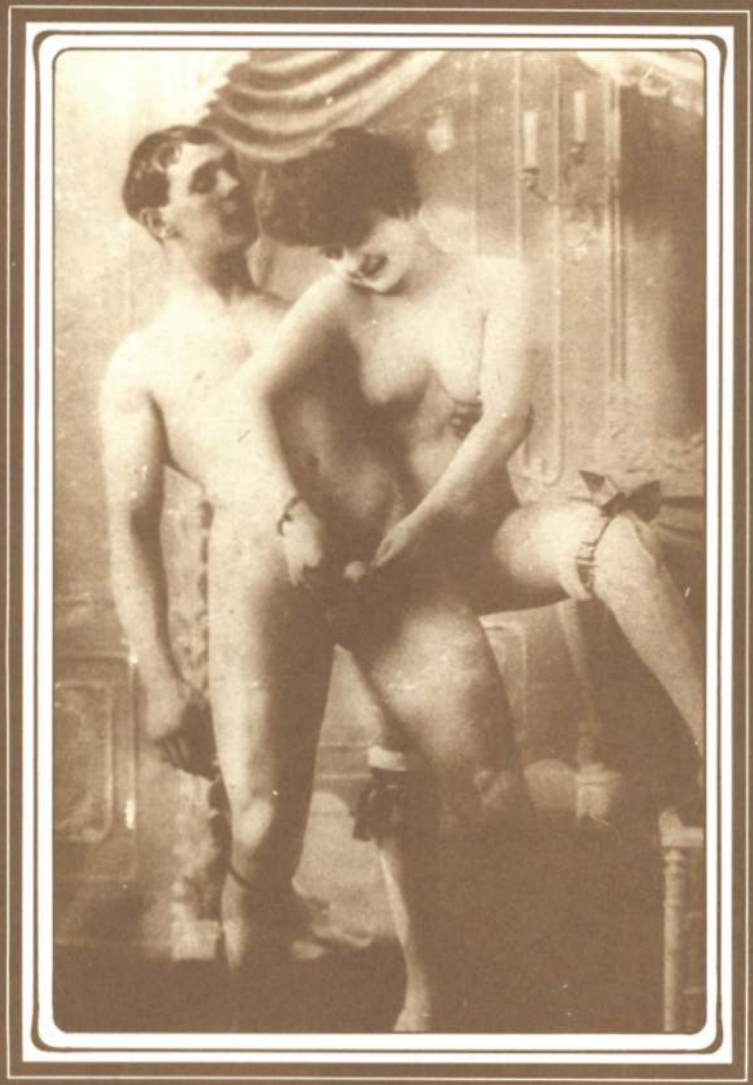
society for this material point to an irrefutable conclusion: these photographs are the artifacts of a major sociological phenomenon. They are indeed a part of our culture and of our civilization.

As with painting and poetry, the art of the erotic photograph helps us to comprehend our vital, emotional relationships not only with our cultural artifacts but with our own life experience. The past is not completely gone, for it lives on in the art and memory of what has been, and becomes an integral part of our sublime consciousness.

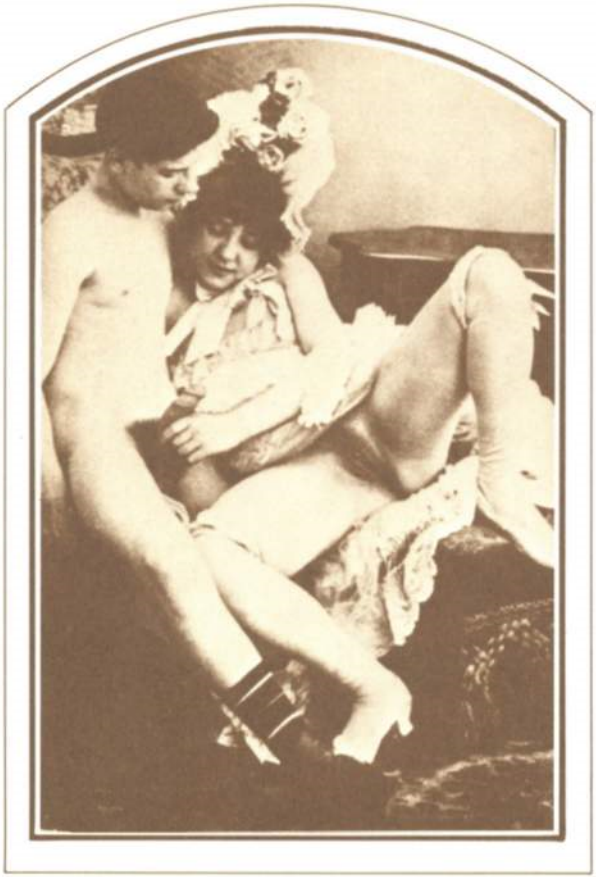
Paul Aratow
Santorini and London, 1972

A MAN AND A WOMAN

magination's shapes and forms do not always correspond directly to the real thing. These photographs represent an artist's skill and point of view in interpreting that correspondence. Their success, like all art, depends on their ability to be, as Horace defined it, "sweet and useful." Thus, the problem was to find and record on film that instant which would best express the intensity of this most basic sexual bond—the romantic coupling of two people. Here the photographer, like all artists, tried to discover what could make a moment eternal.



Germany 1910

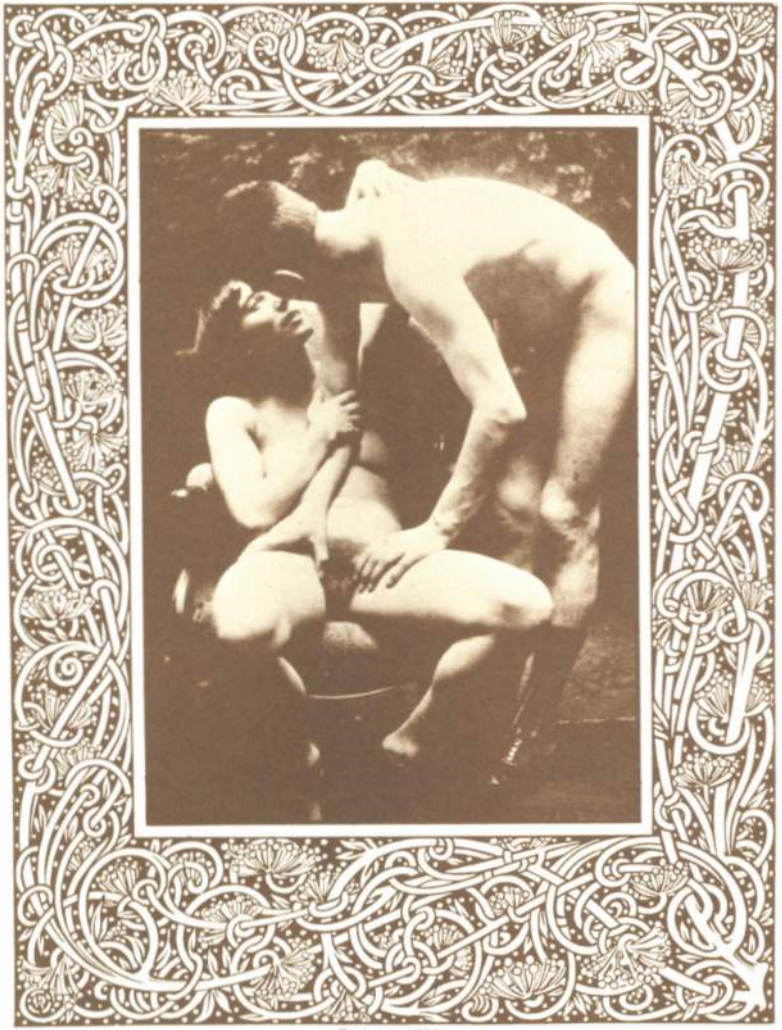


Spain 1870

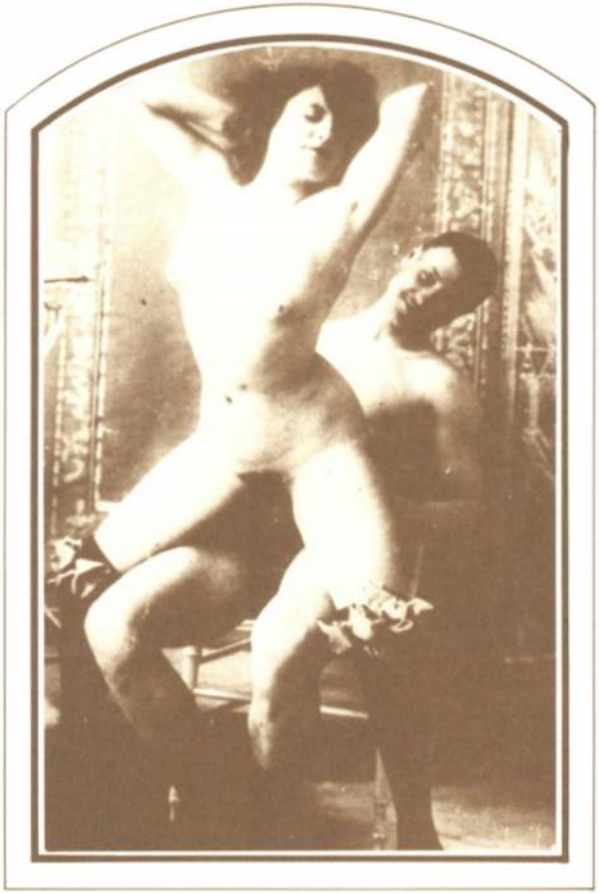
Mexico 1910

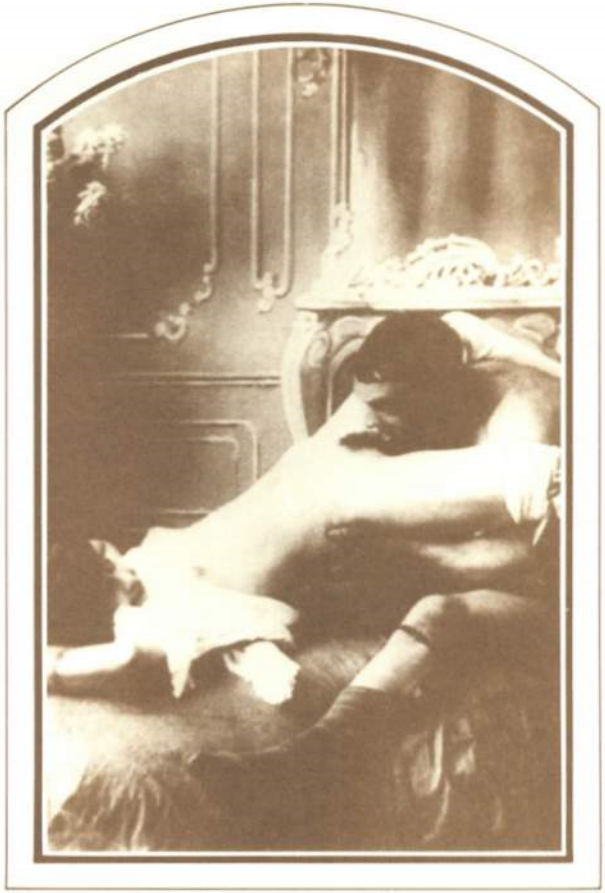
France 1910

France 1910



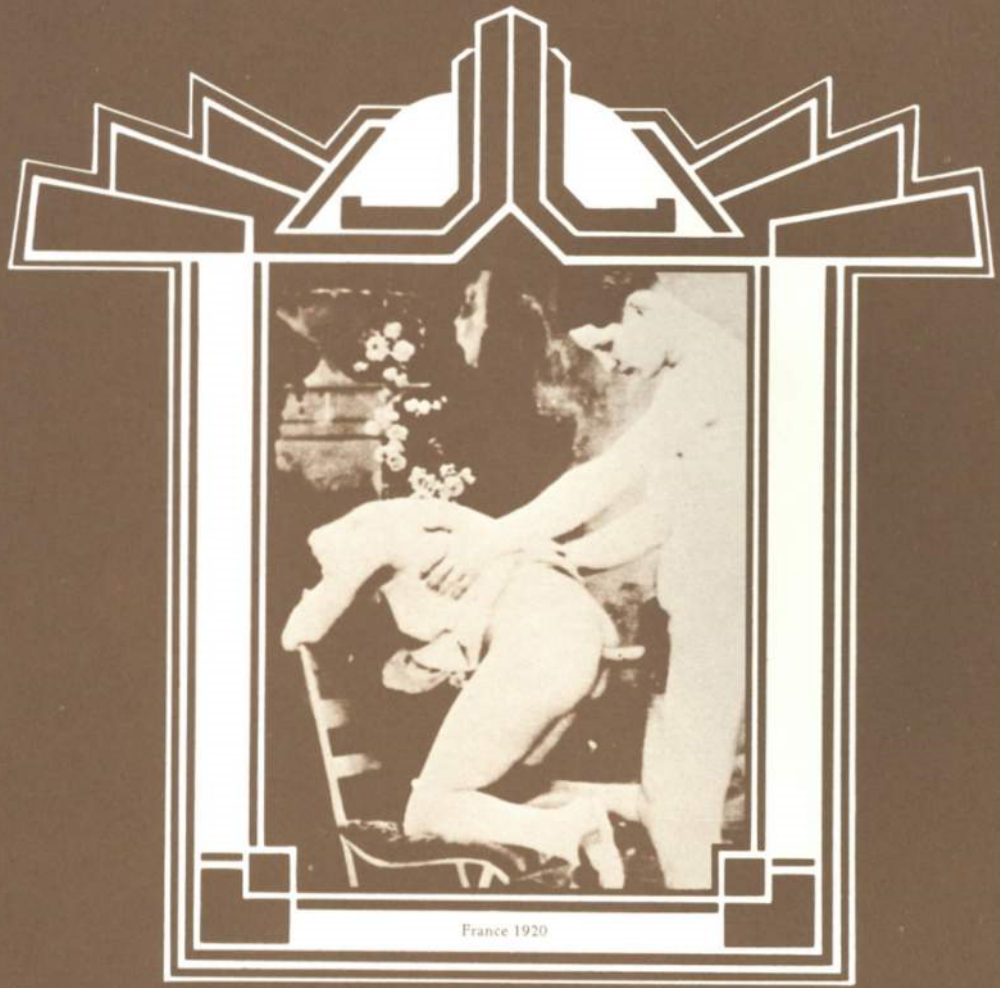
Germany 1920





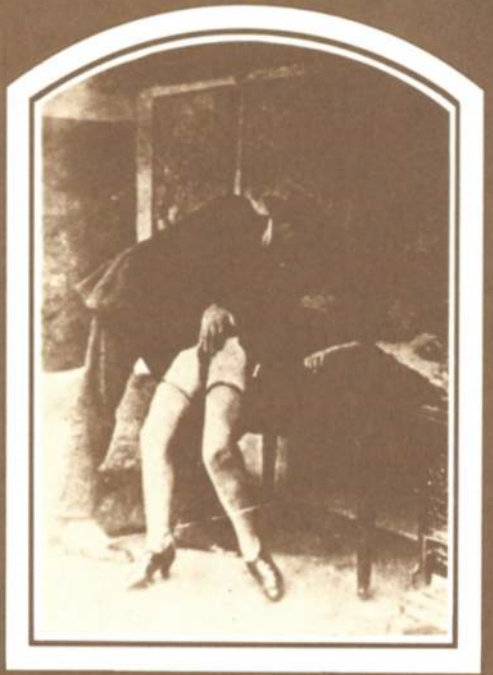
France 1910

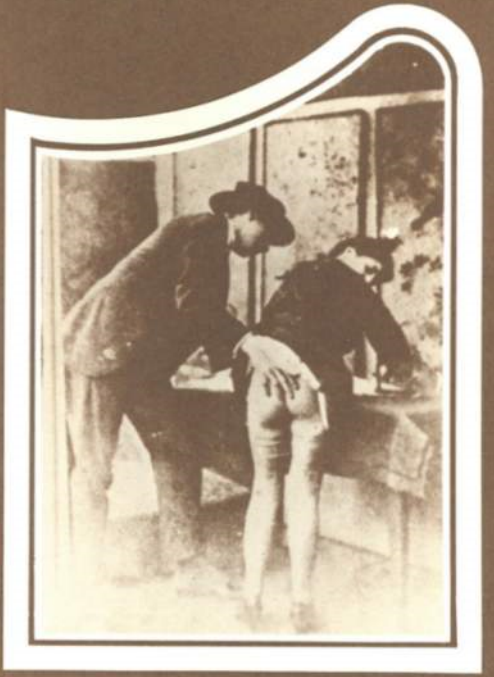
France 1920



France 1920

America 1940

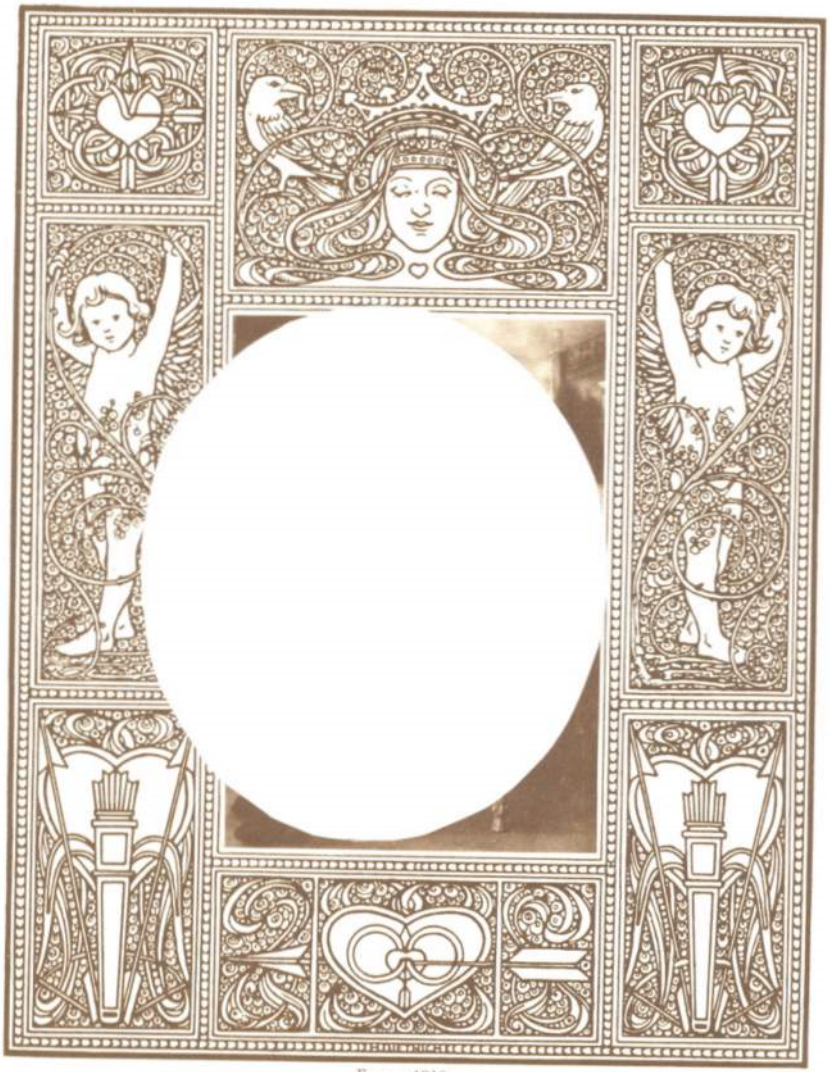




America 1930

Germany 1910

America 1930



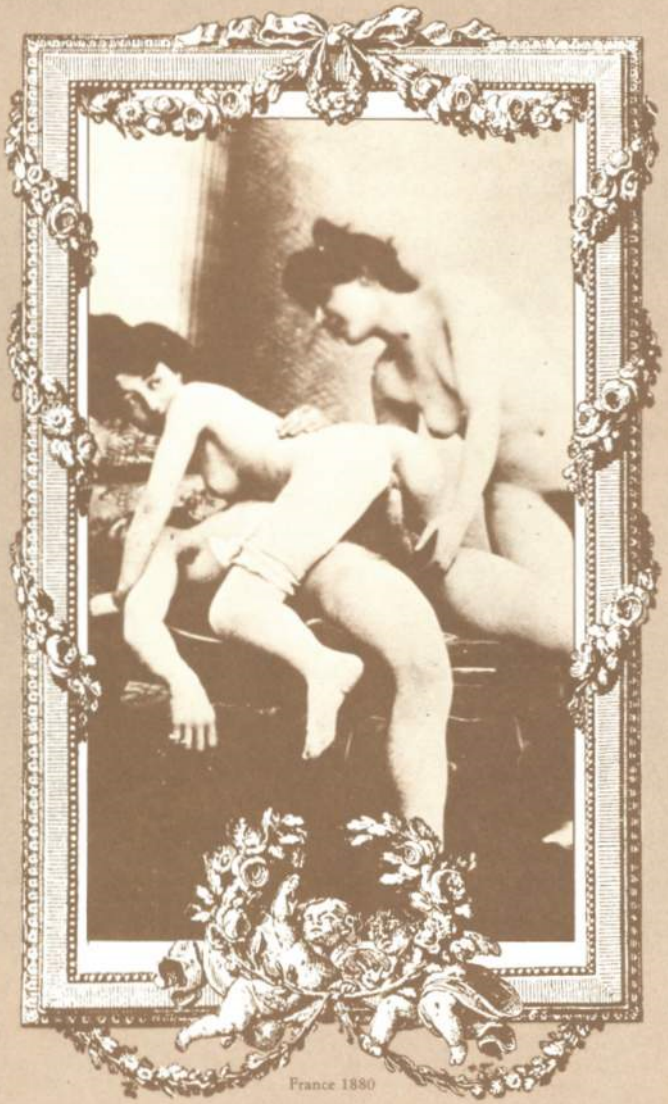
Europe 1910

MONTAGE

What is life but a
succession of events and feelings?
And so we understand instinctively the passage of things.
Do they follow one another in a sequence and what,
if anything,
Does that sequence mean?
Montage is like that, and each picture takes on
a new significance because of its position in
the progression of
images.

My Song, I fear that thou wilt find but few
Who fitly shall conceive thy reasoning,
Of such hard matter dost thou entertain.

Epipsychidion, Percy Bysshe Shelley

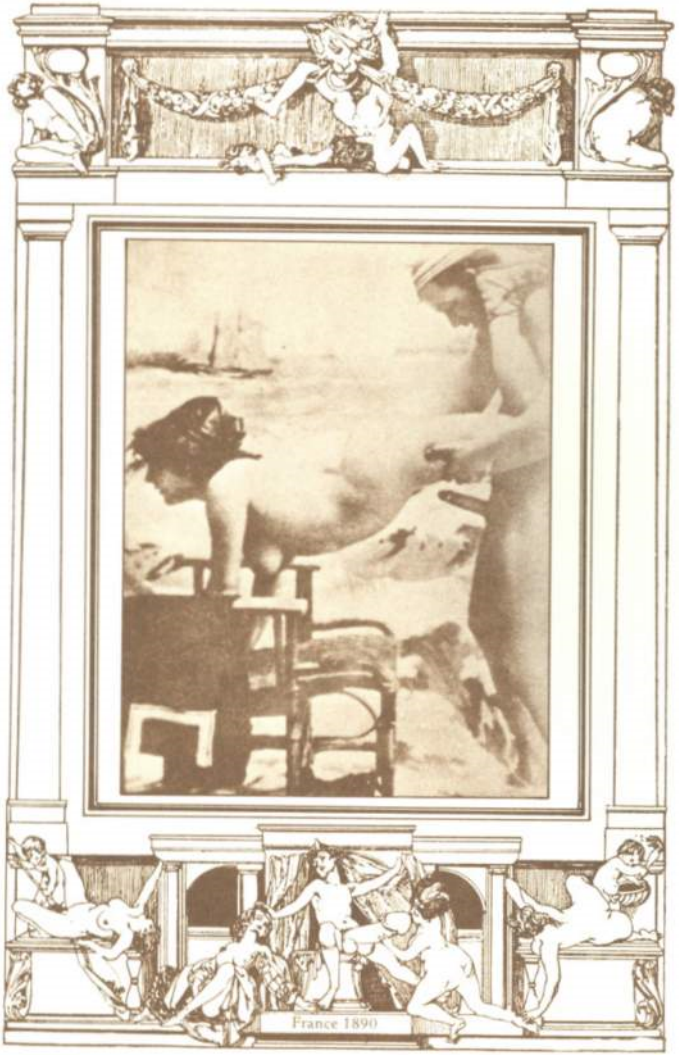


France 1880

America 1930

England 1930

Cuba 1930


France 1890

Texas 1930

France 1910

America 1940

Mexico 1930

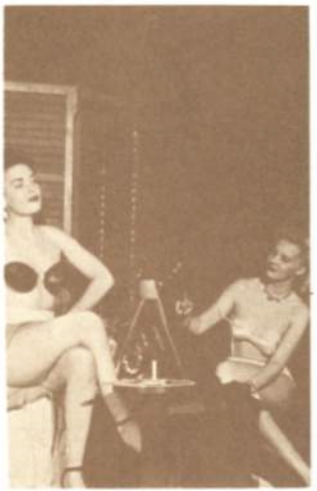
STRIP SERIES

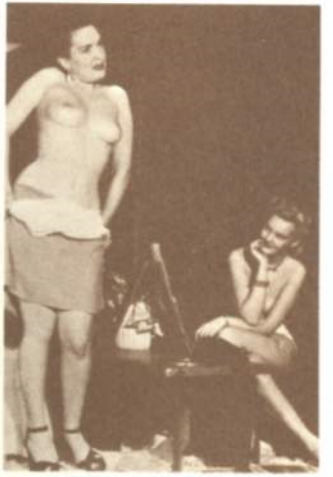
ith the advent of motion pictures, it became more and more natural for man to think in terms of visual narratives, and hosts of conventions governing the progression of images that told a story crept into our aesthetic consciousness. There were, of course, many precedents in both ancient and modern painting, but photography's new harsh realism and the tremendous popularity of the movies established a dominance in visual narrative kinetics that has yet to be challenged. These photographs depend on recalling discrete stages in a single action, the most basic and unsophisticated of visual progressions, with the simplest and most obvious subject matter. What could be more progressive than a woman undressing? It is interesting to note the conspicuous absence of progression series in the older material, when series were still being conceived as matching tableaux, and filmmakers had not yet dominated the national narrative consciousness.

Europe 1930

America 1940

Hawaii 1940





America 1940

Philippines 1940

America 1940

BALLADE

(des dames du temps jadis)

ictes moy ou, n'en quel pays,
Est Flora, la belle Rommaine,
Archipiades, ne Thaïs,
Qui fut sa cousine germaine,
Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine
Dessus riviere ou sus estan,
Qui beaulté ot trop plus qu'humaine.
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

Ou est la tres sage Heloïs,
Pour qui chastré fut et puis moyne
Pierre Esbaillart a Saint Denis?
Pour son amour ot ceste essoyne.
Semblablement, ou est la royne
Qui commanda que Buridan
Fust geté en ung sac en Saine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

La royne Blanche comme lis
Qui chantoit a voix de seraine,
Berte au grant pié, Bietris, Alis,
Haremburgis qui tint le Maine,
Et Jehanne la bonne Lorraine
Qu'Englois brulerent a Rouan;
Ou sont ilz, ou, Vierge souvraine?
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

Prince, n'enquerez de sepmaine
Ou elles sont, ne de cest an,
Qu'a ce reffrain ne vous remaine:
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?

François Villon (1431-1463?)

France 1920

(of the ladies of former times)

ell me where, in what country,
Is Flora, the beautiful Roman,
Archipiades, or Thaïs,
Who was her cousin germane,
Or Echo speaking when one shouted
Over rivers or ponds,
Whose beauty was much more than human.
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

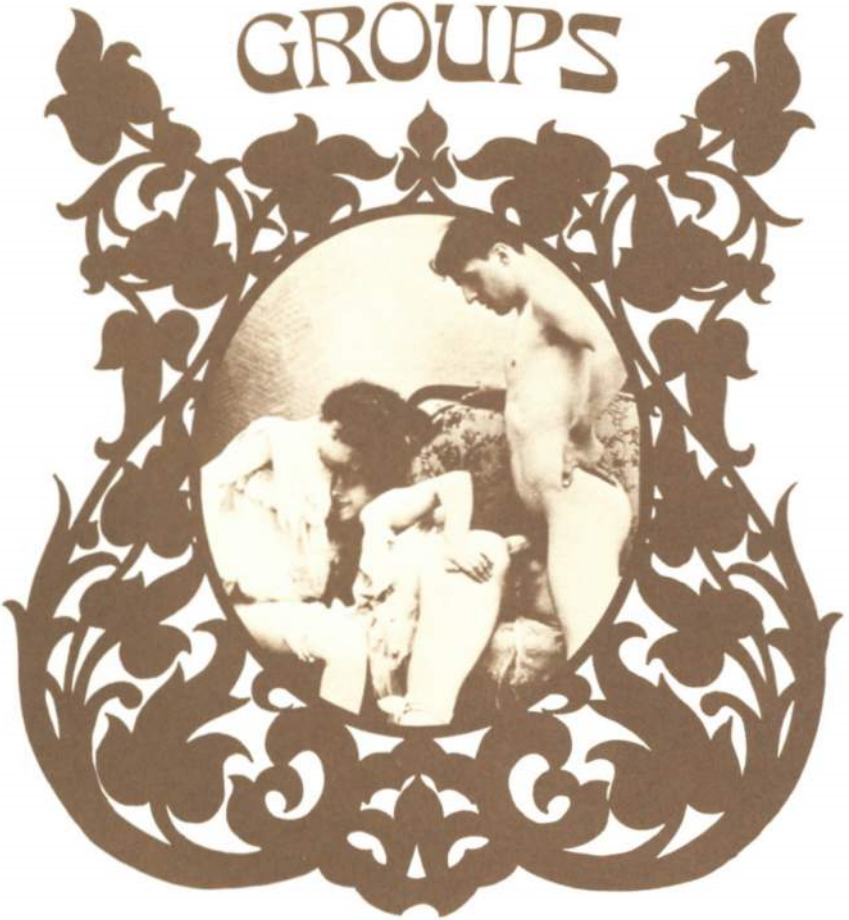
Where is the most wise Heloïse,
For whom castrated and then made monk
Was Pierre Abelard at St. Denis?
For her love he had this trial.
Likewise, where is that queen
Who commanded that Buridan
Be thrown in a sack in the Seine?
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

Queen Blanche, lily-white
Who sang in a siren's voice.
Big-foot Bertha, Beatrice, Alice,
Arembourg who ruled the Maine,
And good Joan of Lorraine
Whom the English burnt at Rouen;
Where are they, where, oh sovereign Virgin?
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

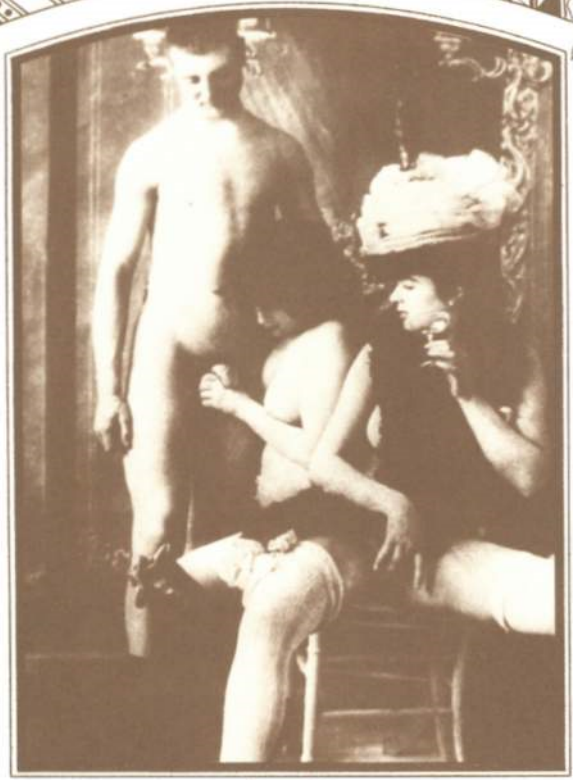
Prince, do not ask this week
Where they are, or even this year,
You would only get this refrain:
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

(Translated by Paul Aratow)

GROUPS



he contemporary tendency toward more liberal concepts of sexual behavior and the continuing fantasy of group sex are not without their historical antecedents. This tendency, somewhat beyond the traditional male-female sexual relationship, has been recorded in various places throughout our civilization: the Greek myths, Medieval fabliaux, Oriental art, Renaissance painting. Graphically these are among the finer examples of what is readily available in books, films, museums and galleries, and of a generally superior artistic quality. As with all good compositions, the total is greater than the sum of the parts.



France 1900

France 1910

France 1880

France 1880

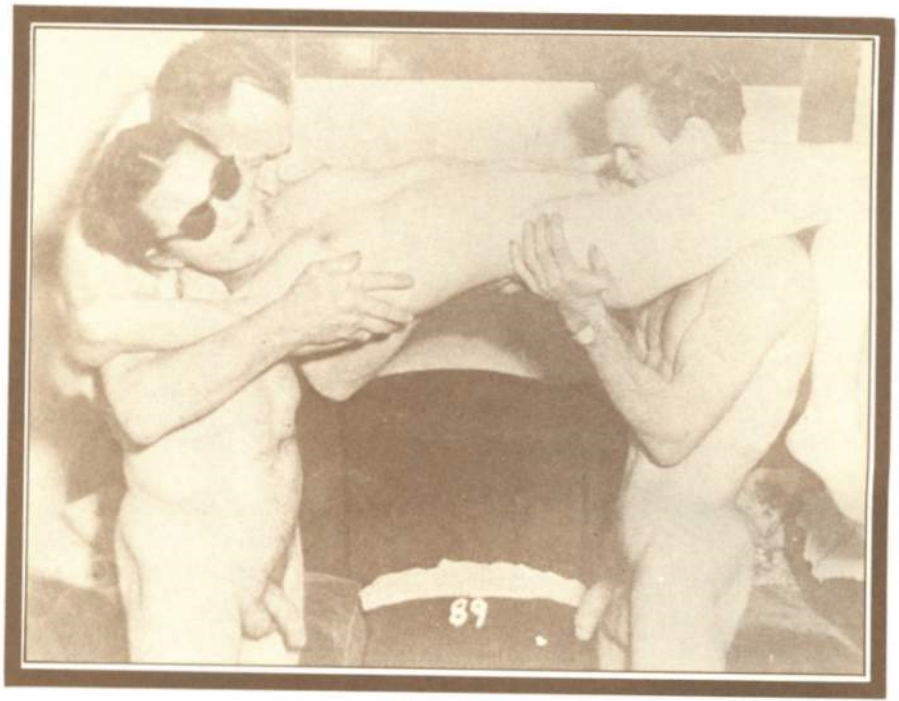
Cuba 1920

Cuba 1920

Germany 1910

Cuba 1930

Texas 1930

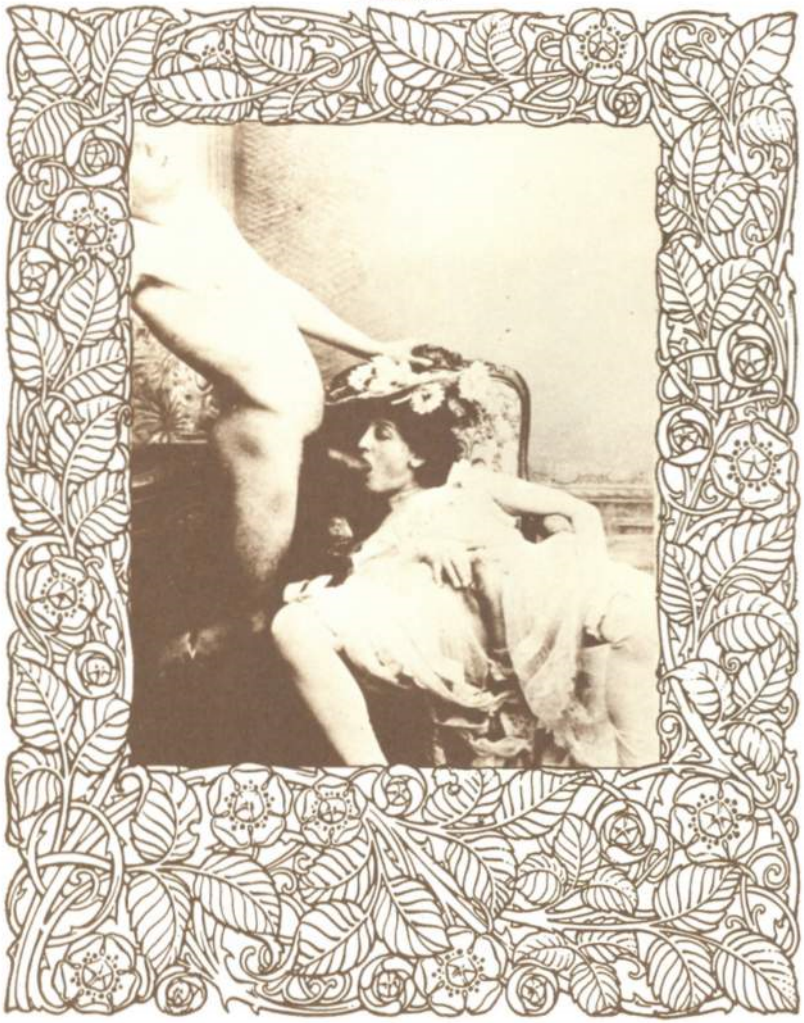


Mexico 1940

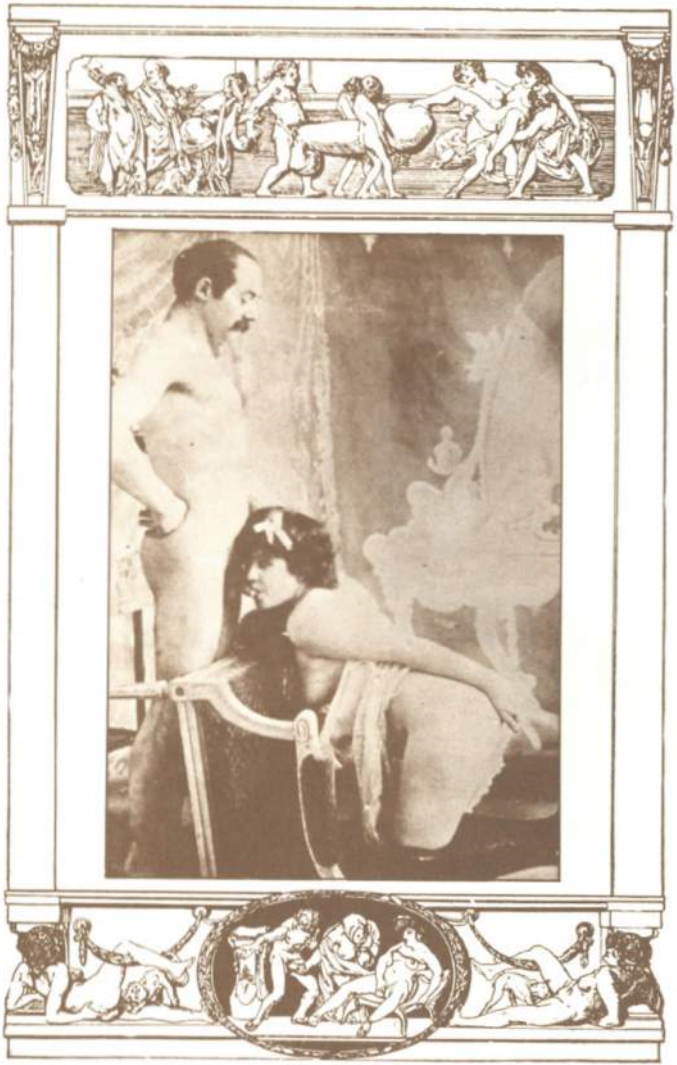
FELLATRICE

ellatrice is a pictorial monograph on a prevailing classical erotic theme, a topic chosen as subject by artists of India, Italy, France, Japan, England and America for paintings, sculptures, etchings, sonnets and photographs. In fact, fellatio is one of the most widespread subjects of erotic art throughout the centuries in many disparate cultures. Magicians, myth-makers and artists, bedfellows all, rely on verification through repetition. The repeated theme or image develops its special significance through its variations, as in the performance of a familiar operatic aria, and not through its generic identity. The graphic arts participate in this conventionalized repetition both abstractly and concretely, by repeating patterns and shapes in the former and subject matter in the latter. Thus we have chosen as topic for this excursion a highly conventionalized act, which has as many divers moods and seasons as participants.

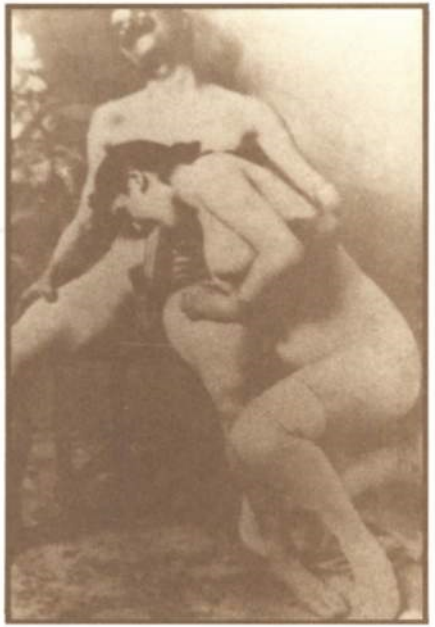
France 1890

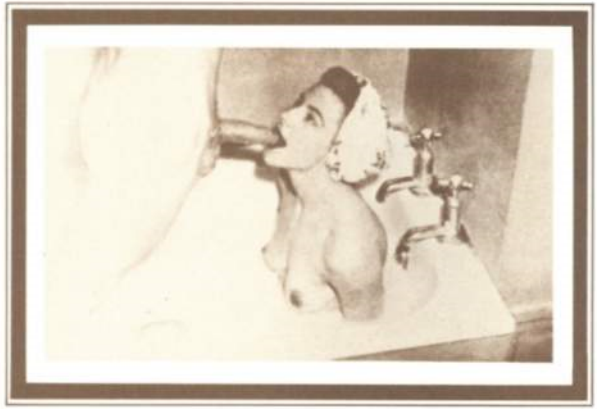


Japan 1930



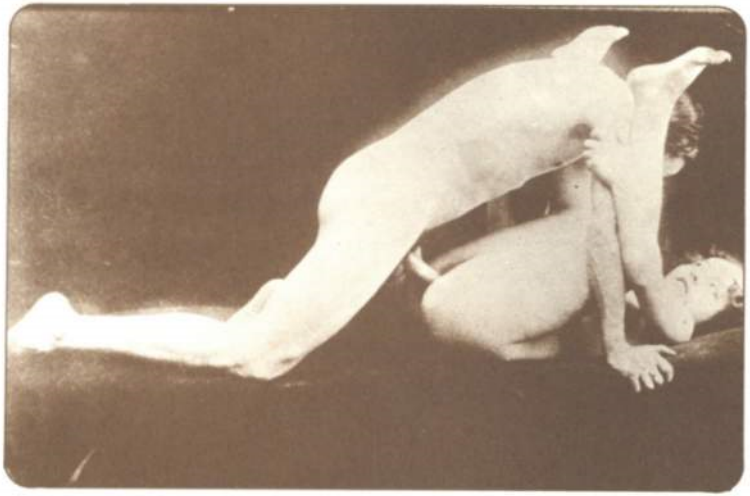
France 1890

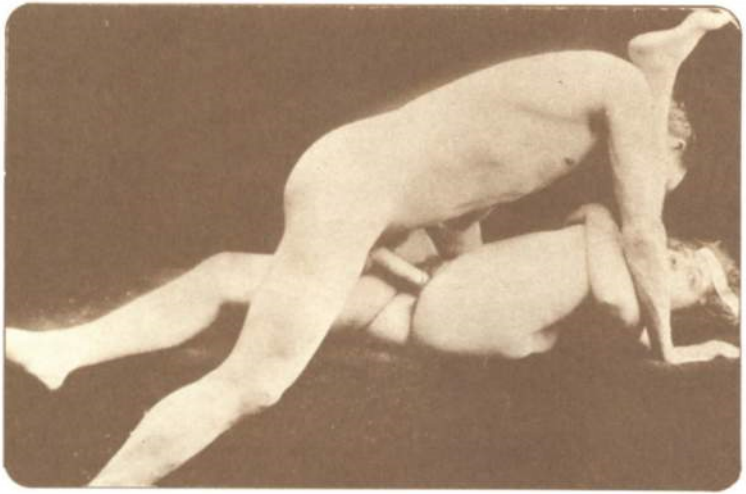


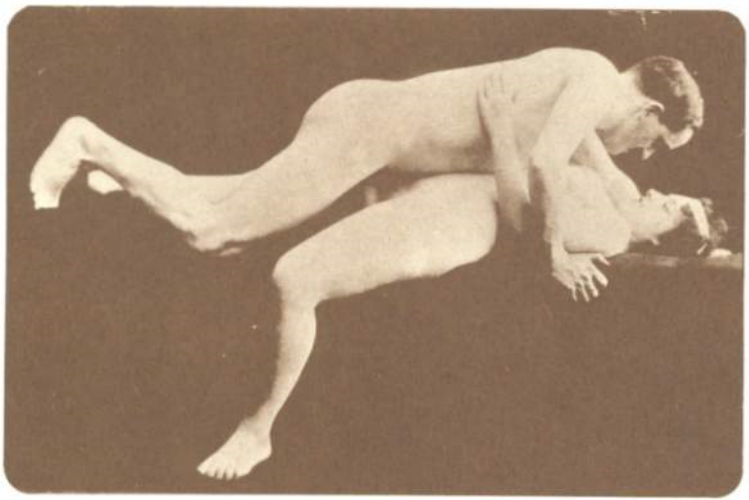


America 1940

PARIS 1910







JEUNES FILLES

ntil recently, erotic photographs were produced by men, for men. Thus they are representative of the general masculine erotic imagination, or at least an indication of what the photographers assumed that to be. It is interesting to speculate on the perspicacity of the producers of this material. They were probably not all formally trained as artists, but they had, they felt, some professional insight into the masculine fantasy world. The number of photographs produced of male homosexual acts is astoundingly low. Many, many photographs depicting lesbian acts have survived, however, second only (perhaps) to acts of heterosexual fellatio. Of the veritable deluge on the subject we have selected some of the more representative and artistic examples.

Paris 1910

Germany 1900

Paris 1920

Germany 1930

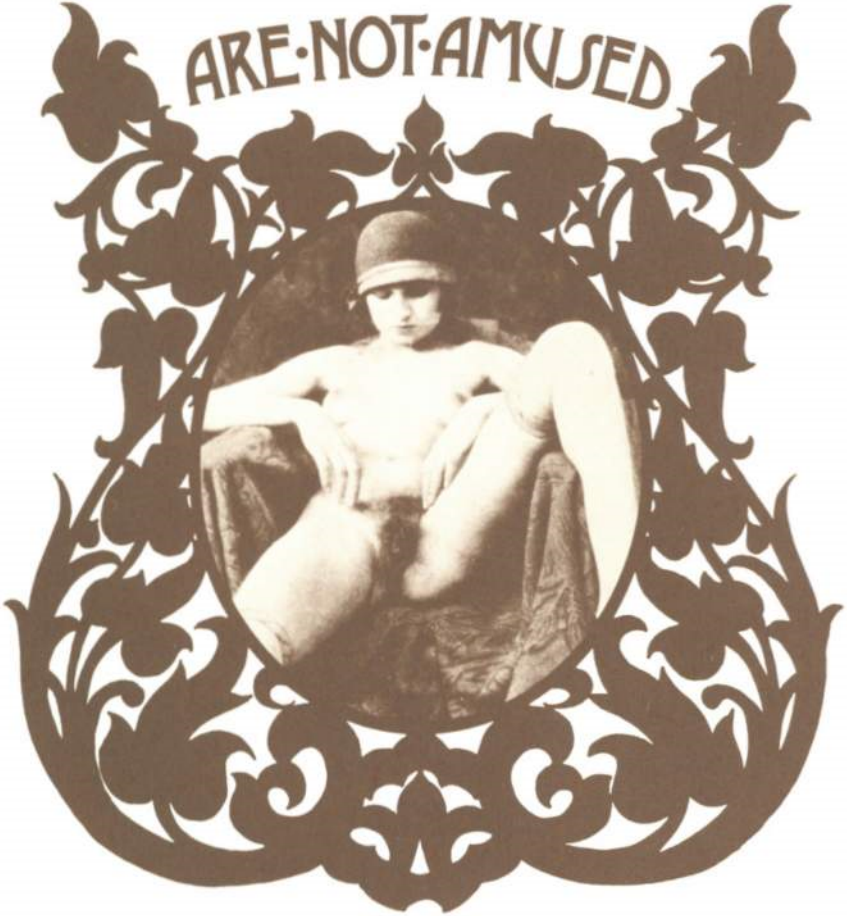
Paris 1880

Mexico 1930

America 1940

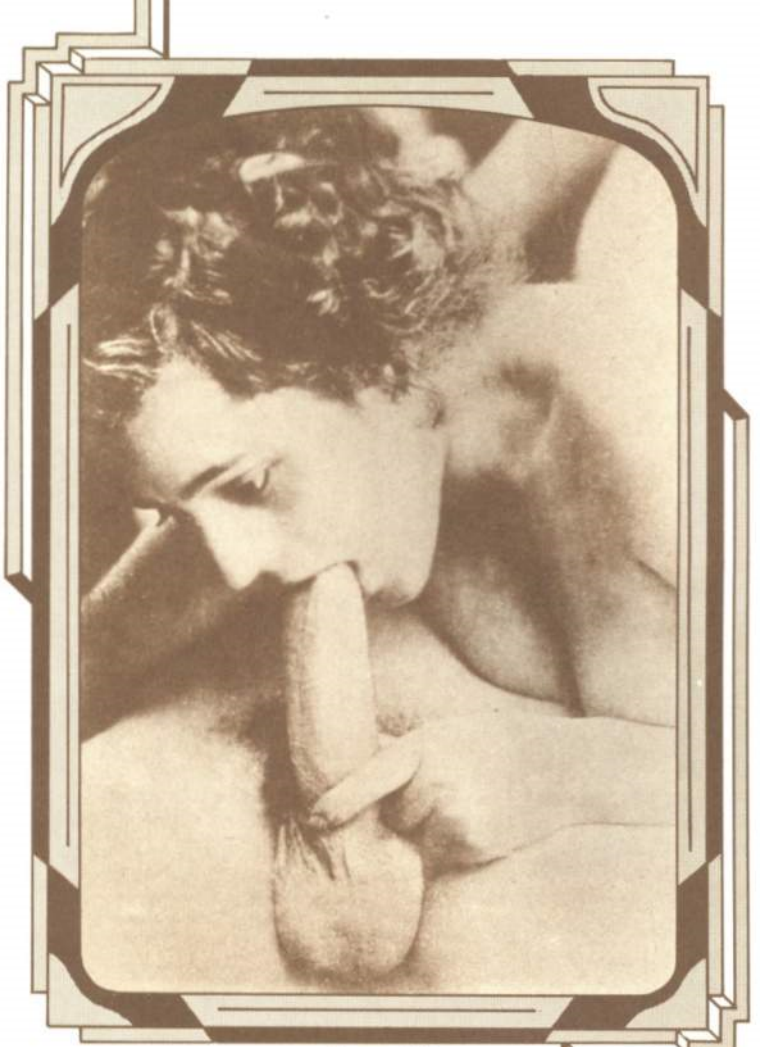
CUBA 1890

WE ARE·NOT·AMUSED



t would be fatuous to draw a simple conclusion, whatever the pretense, from these divers and fabulous images which hold the seeds of an awareness that volumes of prose have ineffectively attempted to transmit through the centuries. Rather, we must derive one small lesson here, the shade of a perception there, for awareness comes in a blinding flash only to romantics; the rest of us must be content with limited and meager infusions of consciousness. We can, however, obtain herein some understanding of certain aspects of the human condition. We live in a relatively fortunate society whose problems, though manifold, do not drive every woman without a husband or an inheritance into slavery or prostitution. This was not always the case, as with the human beings in these photographs. A few portraits have survived which suggest that there were some tears in the chalourous palace of sensuality.

2P



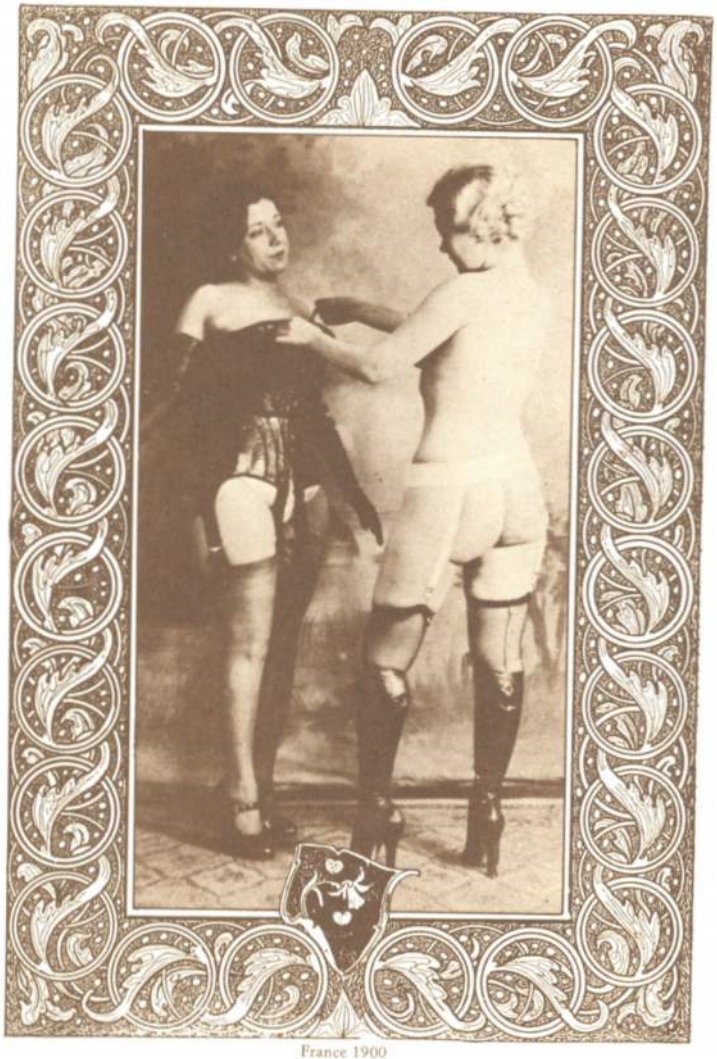
Germany 1930

England 1940

Mexico 1930

America 1930

Mexico 1930



France 1900

AFTERWORD

• • • a contradiction que c'est de chercher dans la réalité les tableaux de la mémoire, auxquels manquerait toujours le charme qui leur vient de la mémoire même et de n'être pas perçus par les sens.

. . . what a contradiction it is to seek in reality for the pictures in one's memory, which must always lack the charm that comes to them from memory itself and from their not being perceived by the senses.

Marcel Proust, Remembrance of Things Past

(Translated by Paul Aratow)

Paul Aratow was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey on June 8, 1937. He received his B.A. in Zoology from Cornell University, his M.A. in English and American Literature and his C. Phil. in Comparative Literature at UC Berkeley, where he taught English and Italian Literature. He has been a filmmaker since 1967 and is now producing and directing feature films.

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